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Productive Parasites

Thinking of Noise as Affect

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In his satirical lexicon, *The Devil's Dictionary*, Ambrose Bierce defines noise as 'a stench in the ear'.¹ Noise, it is often thought, is something we do not want to be around; it is sound that we find unpleasant, or perhaps even unbearable. But just because noise is often felt to be negative, does that mean it is definitively so? Drawing from Michel Serres' notion of the parasite, this article provides a more nuanced explanation for noise that distinguishes itself from prevailing negative narratives, which seek to define noise as unwanted, undesirable or damaging sound. Such narratives have left noise vulnerable to moralising polemics, which construct silence and noise as a dichotomy between the past and present, natural and cultural, relaxing and disturbing, and, fundamentally, good and bad. This article facilitates a reconsideration of noise's ethical connotations by proposing the notion of noise as affect. Noise, according to this line of thinking, is to be thought of as a verb rather than a noun; instead of referring to a human judgement of sound, noise is recognised a process of interruption that induces a change. As affective force, noise has an existence independent from its particular manifestations, sonic or otherwise. Consequently, noise is no longer constituted by, or limited to, human perception; it

allows space for those interruptions and interferences that impact upon entities other than the perceiving subject. Moreover, *apropos* Spinoza's ethico-affective understanding of the body, noise, understood in terms of affect, no longer pertains to an overarching division between 'good' and 'bad'. In other words, there is nothing *inherently* negative, bad or unwanted about noise (and, by extension, nothing *inherently* positive, good or beneficial about silence); rather, these ethical (as opposed to moral) categorisations are relational and contingent. Thinking of noise in terms of affect provides a framework that allows for noise's capacity to diminish and destroy, as well as to enhance and create. Finally, we will consider the use of noise as an artistic resource, which exemplifies what Henry Cowell refers to as 'joys of noise' and the alternate aesthetic implications that an affective definition of noise may carry.

—THE RUPTURE THAT IS NOT A RUPTURE

Noise is most commonly understood as an audible problem, it is sound that is unwanted, undesirable, unpermitted. In the words of British physicist G.W.C. Kaye, noise is 'sound out of place'. For Kaye, sound can become misplaced by its 'excessive loudness, its composition, its persistency or frequency of occurrence (or alternatively, its intermittency), its unexpectedness, untimeliness, or unfamiliarity, its redundancy, inappropriateness, or unreasonableness, its suggestion of intimidation, arrogance, malice, or thoughtlessness'.² Noise is often experienced as destruction, disorder, dirt and pollution: it is thought to tarnish the soundscape with its presence. The French economist Jacques Attali notes that in all cultures, noise has been 'associated with the idea of the weapon, blasphemy, plague'.³ Noise is often associated with contestations of domestic space, what 'I' want to hear in 'my own' home. It is responsible for sleepless nights and neighbourly disputes. The law tries to protect us from it, by trying to exercise some control over its presence: noise is that which is to be abated.⁴ Noise tends to be synonymous with loudness; it is sound taken to the point that it is capable of causing us pain, of temporarily or permanently damaging our bodies.

But what is noise *before* it is unwanted? In order to address this, the question must change from 'what is noise' to 'what does noise do?' What is it that noise does to become unwanted?

At its most basic, noise interrupts. In communication theory, noise is defined as any interference in a channel that prevents the clear or correct communication of a message or signal between the positions of emitter, transmitter and receiver. As J.R. Pierce states, 'in telephony and radio we hear the intended signal against a background of noise, which may be strong or faint and which may vary in quality from the crackling of static to a steady hiss'.⁵ If we extend this communicative definition, emphasising the process by which noise is constituted, then noise can be thought of as having an existence independent of or, rather, not limited to, particular sounds and sources. An interruption need not be loud or abrasive. To be sure, it need not be heard at all. By defining noise as an interruption within a system, noise can be sonic, but it may also be vibrational, visual or informational. It may take the form of the cricket chirping in the dead of night that prevents us from drifting into sleep, television signal interference or the deafening silence as the sound system fails due to a blown fuse.

Nor do interruptions need to be sudden. Interruptions can take the form of an abrupt, unexpected blast but they can also take the form of the persistent hum of traffic that gradually inhibits a conversation. An interruption, however, requires something to interrupt: it requires something to act upon. The hum of the traffic becomes noise once it affects our activities, once it begins to interfere; when it enters into a relationship with a system. That said, we may not know what it is that is interrupting. 'What's that noise?' might become an unanswerable question. Noise, as something that acts upon us, can be divorced from originating actors. So noise may come from the walls, or come from unknown spaces and directions. Noise strikes us as sourceless, coming from nowhere and everywhere. I may not know what it is or what caused it, or how it got here. It is 'the thing that goes bump in the night'.

Noise's role as an interruption within a system is a central theme of Michel Serres' *The Parasite*. Serres begins by telling a story of parasitic encounters. The country rat is invited to dine at the home of the city rat. The city rat feeds off the larder at the home of the tax farmer. The tax farmer has produced nothing: he is a parasite of the fat of the land, through law and power. However, the dinner of the rat parasites is interrupted by another parasite—noise:

The two companions scurry off when they hear a noise at the door. It was only a noise, but it was also a message, a bit of information producing panic: an interruption a corruption, a rupture of information. Was the noise really a message? Wasn't it, rather, static, a parasite? A parasite who has the last word, who produces disorder and who generates a different order.⁶

In French, the word 'parasite' has three distinct but related connotations. It may refer to the parasitic relation of one entity being hosted by another, such as a flea being hosted by a cat. The parasite feeds at the expense of the host but gives nothing in return. By extension, parasite may also be a derogative term for those branded as social scroungers—those who allegedly 'feed off' the state but 'contribute' nothing in return. The third parasite is the informational parasite, it refers to static or noise interference within a channel. These three parasites—the biological, the social and the informational—are all thought of as interferences within a system; they interrupt a pre-existing set of relations. The parasite appears in the midst of things; Serres states that 'the position of the parasite is to be between'.⁷ However, in Serres' thesis the parasite is not a substantial entity; rather it is understood as a type of relation. Host, guest and parasite, or, sender, receiver and noise 'are positions through which any entity—informational, social or biological—must pass'.⁸ Subsequently, the relationship between hosts and parasites is not always clear: who parasites who? In the case of the rat's feast: the parasites parasite the parasite, until they are acted upon by another parasite. This final parasite is thought to be the noise of the tax farmer-parasite—the return of the parasited-parasite.

For Serres, the noise-parasite is inevitable: 'there are channels so there must be noise'.⁹ A vulnerability to interruption is necessary, as Steven Connor states:

Without the sensitivity and responsiveness of the wire, which renders it apt to act as a carrier of the voice or the word, there could be no passage or message at all. Its risk, its exposure to interference, is what makes it work.¹⁰

To twist this a little: perhaps we can say that it is not so much that there is always noise that is perceivable, but rather, there is always the *potential* for noise within a system; there is always the potential for change. As such, there is, perhaps, a noise

before the noise; it is white noise, absolute noise, noise without a signal. This underlying potentiality, the noise before the noise, which flows through channels and systems, through orders of relations, means that there is always noise; it just may not be actualised, it may not be perceivable or it may exist with little intensity. And so the rupture is not a rupture; rather, it is a move from the infra-empirical towards the empirical, from (virtual) potentiality to actuality.

Within this system of fluid, parasitic relations, noise can become contagious, passing between objects and subjects. I may scream with fright as I am startled by the unexpected sound of a pan being dropped in the kitchen. My scream in turn startles my housemate who has dropped the pan, and also my cat, who was previously unaffected by the first noise. Noise spreads through the house, in various directions. A similar relation is at stake for neighbours engaged in 'volume wars'. One household may switch on music to drown out the noise of a car alarm. The music may then disturb another household, whose response is to turn their music up, loudly, to drown out the noise of their neighbours. The first household, riled by this response, up their volume, further antagonising their neighbours. Other households begin to be affected by the noise; television sets are turned up, walls are banged and, eventually, police are called. Their sirens work to disturb an entire neighbourhood. Here, the effects of noise becomes an interruption within another system of relations: the first household turns up the music as a response to the car alarm, only for their music to act as noise for their neighbour. Likewise, the audible glitches, static and crackles that interrupt the radio broadcast we are listening to are the effect of signal noise; the audible noise that we perceive, that interferes with the broadcast, is the result, or the translation, of an inaudible and imperceptible noise within another system of relations.

When noise interrupts, it demands a *reaction*; it induces a change, or modification in the system that it acts upon. Serres' parasitic interference functions to alter a set of relations or patterns of movement. Serres identifies two primary responses to the parasite's intrusion—the host may cast out the parasite, or, alternatively, the host may adapt in order to accommodate the parasite's presence. It is not in the parasite's interests to destroy its host; rather, the parasite strives to create a new, sustainable equilibrium, in which both parasite and host can prosper. The optimum relationship between parasite and host produces a change that is

mutually sustainable, since to destroy the host would ultimately destroy the parasite. The same can be thought of noise. When noise acts upon a system of relations, it may be met with attempts to cease or abate its presence, or the system may adapt to allow for the interruption; it may work around, or work with the interference. Similarly, the noise-parasite may become embedded, it may 'stick' to its host. Although its entrance into the system may be unintentional or unexpected, the embedded parasite is not necessarily extraneous, or a cause of trouble; it may work to provide new information, or generate new effects. As Steven Crocker states:

When we hear the earliest sound recordings of Tennyson reading *Charge of the Light Brigade*, for example, the watered down and scratched out sound conveys the enormous passage of time, just as the static sound of Neil Armstrong's voice on the moon tells us something about his physical distance from us and the newness of space technologies in the 1960s. It would not be difficult to think of countless other cases in which the presence of the medium mixes in with the intended message to produce some whole new effect, not intended by the sender, but taken as information by the receiver. In these cases, noise is not simply an extra third thing to be discounted. It has entered into the message and become part of it.¹¹

Thus while the noise-parasite may work to unsettle or destabilise, it does not simply *destroy* a system of relations. Rather, the noise-parasite induces a *modification* within the system. In turn, noise can be thought of as productive, inasmuch that it generates a systemic change; *for better or for worse*, an alternative order is created out of the moment of disorder.

If noise is an interrupting force that modifies a system of relations, then the question is not just 'what kind' of noise but also 'how much' noise. Noise's extensive, qualitative variability is accompanied and shaped by noise's intensive, quantitative variability: the difference between a glitch and a system crash, between the background hum and the overwhelming roar of the city, between 'the crackling of static to a steady hiss'—is not just one of quality but also quantity: How much noise? How much interruption? How much modification? How much change? And if noise's interruptions have a quantitative and qualitative variability then so too do the reactions it induces. For example, the noise of the traffic that inhibits my

conversation may cause me to increase the volume of my voice, or use more physical gestures, to convey my message. I may not even be aware that I am raising my voice or that I have increased my gesturing in order to accommodate the interference, and I may not consciously register the traffic's increasing volume. Alternatively, the interruption may be so severe it requires me to abandon the space and relocate elsewhere.

The change of relations that noise generates does not have to be overtly physical. Noise can also interrupt *feeling*; it can induce a modulation or modification in mood or temperament. The capacity of noise to have an impact upon feeling is present in the word's etymology: noise is thought to relate to the Latin *nausea*, literally meaning 'seasickness'. It is often said, for example, that 'noise annoys'; it can provoke feelings of frustration or gradually become a source of irritation. Noise can generate fear; it may startle us, or jolt us into a state of alertness. There have been various studies that have linked noise to a range of adverse, non-auditory physiological and psychological effects, including increased blood pressure and stress levels.¹² But the nature of a body's response is also dependent on the state of relations before noise's interference. The capacity of the noise coming from my neighbours to make me feel irritated depends on whether I already feel stressed or irritable. If I feel calm, I may be more tolerant of the neighbours' sonic intrusions and, consequently, will find it easier to accommodate them in 'my' environment. Thus while noise is generative of change, the outcome, or the response to that change is variable.

—THE NOISE AFFECT

What is being implied here is that noise, understood as an interruption that induces a modification in bodies, systems and relations, has an intimate relationship with what we might call affect. Affects, as they are figured in the work of Deleuze and Guattari, and, following on from them, Brian Massumi, concern movement, process and change; they are forces of becoming.¹³ Affects have no meaning in and of themselves. They may travel through signs and representations, but they exist independently of, and function according to a different logic to, that of the symbolic register. Affects do not have a pure, original state; there is not a moment of birth, so to speak. Rather, 'affect arises in the midst of *in-between-ness*: in the capacities to act

and be acted upon'.¹⁴ Like noise, affect exists in the middle of things. It can be thought of as the transitional moment of confusion or indiscernibility between determinable states—between one set of relations and the establishment of a new set of relations.

While the terms are often used interchangeably, affects can be thought of as related to but distinct from emotions.¹⁵ Emotion exists as a point of capture; the point at which affects are pinned down and qualified in consciousness. Emotion is that which is induced by, or a particular expression of, affect. I can 'have' or 'possess' my own emotions, but affects, by contrast, traverse or overwhelm me: they are beyond my control. In other words: 'where emotion suggests something that happens inside and tends toward outward expression, affect indicates something relational and transformative. One has emotions; one is affected by people or things.'¹⁶ But if affect does not belong to the subject, then it also does not belong to the object. Affect, as Guattari describes it, is 'a pre-personal category, installed "before" the circumscription of identities, and manifested by unlocatable transferences, unlocatable with regard to their origin as well as with regard to their destination'.¹⁷ As Seigworth points out, the unlocatability of affect means that it is best conceived as 'a-subjective/a-objective, or, again following Guattari, maybe it is less that affect has no place than that it is *potentially there in every place*, immanent: half subject, half object, and so, immanently inter-sub-/objective'.¹⁸ Subsequently, thinking of noise as affect allows us to understand noise as having an existence independent from particular subjects or objects that it may enter into relation with. To be sure, no sound is inherently 'noise' or 'noisy'. Rather, certain entities—vibrations, sounds, data, frequencies—may become noise 'carriers', in functioning as an interference. As such, it is more useful to think of noise in terms of effects, rather than causes: *noise is an affect with effects*.

Noise can be thought of as functioning on an affective register, inasmuch that it works to modulate bodily states. It should be noted, however, that within this context, the term 'body' does not only refer to the individual human body (the body-as-subject). Noise can be understood to affect the body in its broadest sense, as it is defined by seventeenth-century Dutch philosopher, Benedict de Spinoza.¹⁹ The Spinozan body reflects a deviation from Cartesian dualism. For the Cartesian subject, mind and body are distinct substances, but they interact causally. Changes in the

mind can generate changes in the body and physical changes can produce mental ones. In Spinoza's thesis, by contrast, these two entities—thought and the mind, action and the body—are proposed as equal and parallel planes, they exist as different expressions of the same substance. In turn, the dualism between body and mind is collapsed, insomuch that body and mind are not two aspects of one thing, but, rather, they exist as one thing—a single, universal and infinite substance—expressed in different ways. Body and mind are two distinct modifications (or modes) of a single substance. For Spinoza, this substance has infinite 'attributes'. The attribute is an expression of substance (that is, the expressing agent). However, we only know two of these attributes: thought and extension. The mind obeys the laws of thought while the body obeys the laws of extension—of movement and rest. Since the body and the mind are parallel and equal expressions, one principle must be matched in the realm of the other. The structure and function of the mind has a parallel relationship to the structure and function of the body; the nature of the mind's thought must be affirmed by the nature of the body's action.

If the body and mind are different expressions of the same substance, then bodies cannot be differentiated by an appeal to individual essences. In its Spinozan conception, the body cannot be defined as a static, complete unit with a stable internal structure; it does not refer to the bordered, autonomous subject. Rather, the body is defined in accordance with two principles. First, a body consists of a series of dynamic relations: 'bodies are distinguished from one another in respect of motion and rest, quickness and slowness, and not in respect of substance'.²⁰ A body, irrespective of size, is a composite of an infinite number of particles. These particles, which can be understood as simple bodies, exist in relations of motion and rest, of speed and slowness. Second, a body is defined by its affective capacity: its power to act upon and be acted upon by other, distinct, bodies. A body, be it simple or composite, is set in motion at a specific rate of speed or slowness through being acted upon by another body in motion. This body can also set other bodies in motion at a specific rate of speed or slowness.

Spinoza's thesis allows for a non-anthropocentric notion of the body; in understanding the body as a dynamic assemblage of relations between smaller bodies, which has the capacity to affect and be affected, the body is not simply limited to its organic manifestations, nor is it defined by its capacity for thought. A

body may be the human body, or an animal-body, but it may also be a social-body, a sound-body, or a linguistic-body. A crowd, for example, can be thought of as a single, discrete body, composed of a multitude of smaller bodies. Moreover, the body, and the structure and speed of its dynamic relations, are always subject to change: what we recognise as a body is only a temporary, stable relationship. The body remains open to the future; its relations are composed and recomposed. More human-bodies may join the crowd-body as other human-bodies break off. The composition of the crowd body may radically change when it is acted upon by, for example, a police-body. Since the body necessarily remains open to change, we cannot know for certain what forms the body may take, the extent of its power, the extent to which it may affect and be affected. We cannot say what it means to be a body, for 'no one has yet determined what a body can do'.²¹

If noise is that which acts upon the (Spinozan) body, inducing a change in relations, then noise does not only impact upon human lives. Rather, noise is able to affect other body-formations: a cellular collective, an individual, a crowd, a population, a city, a computer, voice recognition technologies, a society, a feast of rats. Take for example, the Mosquito, a device that emits an uncomfortable, high-pitched frequency around 17khz. Operating on similar principles as ultrasonic pest control devices, the Mosquito device is used to dispel socially 'undesirable' groups of young people from public spaces and prevent them congregating in particular areas. The device targets a particular demographic according to age; the sound is designed to be heard by those under twenty-five, since the bandwidth of audible frequencies deteriorates with age. It is not so much that the high-pitched frequency is inherently 'noisy' but that such a device is designed to function as noise: it is designed to interfere in its target's lives, to interrupt the formation of crowd-bodies. As such, the device acts upon both the individual body of a young person and the composite body of 'youths' that it seeks to dispel. Similarly, Steve Goodman has discussed the role of acoustic force as a means of modulating the fear of populations; fear not only as an individual, subjective emotion or feeling but also a collective mood. In 2005, sonic booms were deployed indiscriminately against the civilian populations that inhabit the Gaza strip. These were reported to cause stress, panic attacks, miscarriages, heart problems and nose bleeds.²² By indiscriminately disturbing the smaller bodies, of individuals, families, schools and local communities, sonic booms also act upon

the larger, collective, population-body; they send shockwaves through communities, giving rise to a general ambiance of fear or dread. However, the deployment of sonic booms and other acoustic weapons ‘threatens not just the traumatised emotional disposition and physiology of the population but the very structure of the built environment’.²³ In Gaza, for example, there were also reports of broken windows, cracked walls and structural damage to buildings. In turn, noise can be understood as an affective force that traverses normative dualisms between the body and mind, individual and collective, subject and object. Noise draws no distinction between a body’s organic and non-organic components, between the walls of Jericho and the populace it contains: all are acted upon by noise.²⁴ Understanding noise in this way, as that which can impact upon and induce change in a body’s series of relations, significantly differs from the notion of noise as a (human) judgement of sound, for the ear of the beholder is no longer the privileged site of noise. It runs against the idea that there can be ‘no noise ... without listening’.²⁵ Rather, as an affective interruption, noise has an existence that does not rely on affirmation through the ear, the eye and human perception more generally.

—BEYOND GOOD AND EVIL: NOISE, SILENCE AND AESTHETIC MORALISM

Thus far we have primarily focused on noise’s negative effects: its ability to destroy, diminish or annoy. These effects are what allows noise’s interruptions to become unwanted, as Garret Keizer notes: ‘to human beings, some sounds are just noise. Some sounds interrupt their sleep, damage their hearing, raise their blood pressure, slow their children’s progress at school, and banish the sweet thoughts and tender feelings they harbor towards sex. Those sounds are unwanted.’²⁶ However, to return to where we began, thinking about noise as affect provides a means of decoupling noise from a definitive ‘badness’ or ‘un-ness’ (noise as unwanted, undesirable, unintentional, unordered or unpermitted), allowing a reconsideration of certain normative, ethico-aesthetic associations.

Noise is typically thought of as negative; and, as such, is placed in binaristic opposition to that which it is not. Paul Hegarty, for example, states: ‘noise is a negativity: defined in opposition to something else, for example, meaning, music, structure, skill, beauty, etc. Historically, it has been thought of as literally negative: “that’s just noise”’.²⁷ As sound that is unwanted, noise is defined in relation to that

which it is not: wanted. However, these dualisms that have constituted noise can tell of deeply embedded ideological presuppositions that are both powerful and troubling. The dichotomy of noise and silence, for example, frequently becomes synonymous with the distinction between the urban and the rural, the natural and the manufactured, the present and the past. Silence is instilled with a spiritual tranquility, tranquillity is equated with the natural, and the natural is equated with the beautiful. It is romanticised as belonging to a lost, better time, which remained unbroken by the sounds of machines, the presence of anti-social teenagers and the outpourings of around-the-clock entertainment; the contemporary culture of noise. R. Murray Schafer, for example, laments the saturation of the soundscape with noise that has caused the death of, sonically speaking, a better time, a time in which silence was still prominent in everyday life:

In the past were muted sanctuaries where anyone suffering from sound fatigue could go into retirement for recomposure of the psyche ... at one time stillness was a precious article in an unwritten code of human rights. Man had reservoirs of stillness in his life to restore the spiritual metabolism. Even in the hearts of cities there were dark, still churches and libraries, or the privacy of drawing room and bedroom. Outside the throb of cities, the countryside was accessible with its lulling whirr of natural sounds. There will still times too. The holy days were quieter before they became holidays. In North America, Sunday became Fun-day. The importance of these quiet groves and times far transcended the particular purposes to which they were put. We can comprehend this clearly only now that we have lost them.²⁸

While silence is construed as 'natural', noise, by contrast, is distinctly 'unnatural'. It is heard as the product of urbanisation and capitalism; it belongs to the city and the industry. It lies on the side of pollution, damage and distraction; it is that which is to be silenced. While silence is posited as enhancing concentration, inducing calmness, and allowing contemplation, noise is detrimental to our quality of life. Noise, we are told, blocks thought, or, rather, blocks 'proper' thought. The generation of teenagers and young adults who insist on listening to music on a near-constant basis remain in a state of inattentiveness:

Thought is an essentially silent activity and is difficult to sustain in a noisy society—and certainly is likely to become superficial when competing with other stimuli. This cannot be good for our collective cultural health.²⁹

The message is loud and clear: noise and silence have a moral content. Noise denies the ‘human right’ of silence. It marks a lack of consideration and respect for neighbours, communities and environments. It is silence that needs protection from noise and not vice versa—it would seem strange to lament the loss of noise to silence. As Stuart Sim argues, ‘noise must never be allowed to overwhelm silence ... we certainly have the ability to destroy silence, and do so only too readily—and too casually’.³⁰ Silence is a ‘good’ that is broken by ‘bad’ noise.

These dichotomisations of silence/noise and their categorical assimilation with constructions of past/present, nature/city, concentration /distraction, oppressed/oppressor, tranquillity/disturbance and, ultimately, a moral register of good/bad, however, risk assuming there to be standard or shared reactions to particular sonic environments. In turn, the politics of silence and politics of noise tend to overlook those individuals, generations and communities who do not fit this affective model; those who do not share the aesthetic preference for silence or the sensations of those who find what are typically thought of as noisy environments disturbing, irritating or distracting. For example, while there has been significant attention to the use of noise as a means of torture, there is also the torturous silence of enforced solitary confinement. Silence can be just as alienating or disturbing as noise. To be sure, the moralising polemics of silence often omit questions of silencing, of who is the bringer of noise for whom? Who is to be kept silent? Is it the ‘noisy’ foreigners? The ‘gossiping’ women? Who is it that has laid claims to silence, who are its gatekeepers and regulators, and who is it that silence abates—is silence elective or oppressive? The silence of transcendental thought or the silence of protest? For whom is silence a ‘human right’ and for whom is silence a violation of those rights?

Anahid Kassabian’s work on ubiquitous listening has drawn attention to the problems with such generalisations about experiences of and with sound. Within discourses of musical reception there has been a marked tendency to conflate listening with attention and attention with consciousness. This presumption guides, for example, the normative paradigm of structural listening and its purported opposition to passive, inattentive listening. *Contra* this conflation, Kassabian argues

that there are many kinds of listening, with modulating degrees of consciousness, attentiveness and affectivity. In short, listening does not have to be attentive or conscious, nor does it have to be attentive or conscious to have an impact on our bodies and, ultimately, how we 'feel'. Thus it is not so much that teenagers who surround themselves with music are incapable of anything beyond superficial thought. Rather, as Kassabian states:

Those of us living in industrialised settings have developed, from the omnipresence of music in our daily lives, a mode of listening dissociated from specific generic characteristics of the music. In this mode we listen 'alongside' or simultaneous with other activities.³¹

Thus while there are those who think of themselves as requiring silence to work, there are also those who prefer work 'alongside' sound and music. There are those who use sound and music to 'fill the deadly silences', to make the prospect of an empty house less daunting. There are even those who prefer to sleep with sound—there are an abundance of sleep sound devices, CDs and, more recently, smartphone apps available that are marketed to help the listener fall asleep.³² Along with the predictable repertoire of 'natural' soothing sounds—whale song, rainforest sounds, waves crashing, stream sounds—there are sounds available that are altogether 'unnatural', and might typically be thought of as a hindrance to sleep—the sound of fans, highway traffic and air conditioning units, for example. Similarly, white noise machines may be used to mask other noises; such devices interrupt potential interruptions, preventing them from disturbing the listener.

Sound created by an individual in their own domestic space is one thing, but noise intruding from somewhere else is altogether different. Keizer argues that noise is a marker of social inequality, inasmuch that it disproportionately affects the socially and politically 'weak': the elderly, children, the sick, racial minorities, neurological minorities, prisoners and the poor.³³ The urban poor, for example, tend to be condemned to noisy neighborhoods, whereas quietness remains a luxury for those who can afford it. Keizer warns against naive generalisations, the 'callous and condescending assumption' that those living in poorer neighborhoods are happy with the levels of noise because 'it's what "those" people do. "It's their culture". Their ears are different.'³⁴ Yet equally, what happens when the interrupting sounds of neighbours becomes part of familiar everyday life? To return to my earlier claim

that it would seem strange to lament the loss of noise to silence, in Jacqueline Waldock's research on Liverpool's sound environment a number of participants from Toxteth's Welsh streets (an area of housing currently due for demolition) have commented on missing the sounds of their neighbours after they have been (forcibly) relocated to 'better' housing with thicker walls. Participant Mrs T. states:

I always used to hear the neighbours through the walls. I could hear them, and they could hear me. It made me feel safe knowing that someone would hear me if I fell or they would check on me if they couldn't hear me moving or I would check on them if I heard a thump or a scream.³⁵

Similarly, participant N., when commenting on a recording of the sounds of her neighbours coming through the wall, said 'it's the sound of community and sharing'. As Waldock argues, the participant's relationship with the sounds of their neighbours 'differs greatly from the assumed norm of annoyance at neighbours who invade the private domestic space of others'.³⁶

To summarise: just as silence is not always felt as 'good', noise is not always felt as 'bad'. It has already been suggested that noise is productive inasmuch that it generates a response, and these responses may range from barely noticeable modulations to a radical change of systemic relations. However, it does not follow that the change that noise induces is always 'bad' or a tarnishing of a pre-existing 'good'—the disturbance of the 'nice' quiet neighbourhood by unwelcome newcomers. While noise undeniably can have a negative impact upon people's lives (and, undoubtedly, upon some people's lives more than others), this does not mean that noise is *definitively* negative. Likewise, recognising noise as productive is not the same as saying that noise is positive. Rather, noise's 'badness' or 'goodness' is contingent. Thinking of noise as affect allows space for this contingency—it recognises noise's 'goodness' or 'badness' as secondary and relational. In order to expand on this, we will briefly return to Spinozan body.

For Spinoza, there are no universal, moral values of good or evil. Instead, morality is replaced with an ethical order. Good and bad are understood as relational: what we call 'good' is that which enhances the power of the body to act (thus having a positive affect) whereas what we call 'bad' is that which diminishes the power of the body to act (thus having a negative affect). Take, for example, food. On one hand, food-body may have a positive relation with our body. As we consume

the food-body, compounding it with ours, it gives us energy and nourishment. In short, it increases our power. But we may have a negative encounter with the food-body. Our body may have an allergic reaction to the food, causing the relations of the body to deteriorate. There is nothing inherently good or evil about food, irrespective of the benefit or harm it may cause. Rather, whether or not food is 'good' or 'bad', that is, beneficial or harmful, is determined by its relations with other bodies.

Likewise, there is nothing inherently evil, torturous, violent or fascistic about noise, irrespective of the rhetorical force it is afforded or the means that it may be put to. Noise may annoy us and infuriate us but it may also help us sleep, or instil us with a sense of community and belonging. Noise is like Derrida's *Pharmakon*—is it poison or is it cure?³⁷ Both, perhaps, depending on how it is taken. To be sure, Attali notes that while noise has often been thought of as a weapon of death, as a source of pain, violence and destruction, it has also long been considered to have a curative function: 'noise has always been perceived as a source of exaltation, a kind of therapeutic drug capable of curing tarantula bites, or according to Boissier de Sauvages (in his *Nosologica methodica*) "fourteen forms of melancholy"'.³⁸ Noise, accordingly, has the potential to not only diminish bodies, as in, for example, the use of sonic and vibrational weaponry to disperse the particles of crowd-bodies, but also to enhance the power of the body, insomuch that it has the potential to create affirmative and positive affections and responses. And this positive potential has been readily explored in the arts.

—THE JOYS OF NOISE

The 'joys of noise', as the composer Henry Cowell puts it, have been one of the dominant themes of twentieth- and twenty-first-century aesthetics from the typical (albeit problematic) lineage of 'noise' that is drawn through the Futurists, Varese, *musique concrète*, Cage, Dada, Fluxus, industrial music, drone, free Jazz, Japanese noise music and glitch, to circuit bending, record scratching and the popular use of gain, distortion and feedback in guitar playing. Here, the irritating ring of tinnitus, or the Mosquito become the Royji Ikeda's intricate, infrasonic compositions. The scratched, skipping compact disc becomes Yasuamo Tone's Wounded CDs. Many of these practices tend to be placed under the quasi-idiomatic banner of 'noise music', a term typically used to refer to number of geographically, historically and

generically disparate practices that seemingly share common terrain in utilising noise, concepts of noise and noisy sounds as artistic resources.

If noise pertains to unwanted, meaningless or non-musical sound, then 'noise music' exists as a paradox. It arises from between the wanted and unwanted, between the desirable and undesirable, between music and noise. Often, artistic uses of noise have been supported by notions of taboo breaking and transgression. Noise music crosses the line. It brings inside what is to be left outside, it threatens musicality, threatens sonic conventions and threatens its audience with the raw 'shock' that is noise. But in these instances noise can never really be noise: it can never truly be unwanted, if it is defined as such. It remains trapped in the musical, as a simulacrum of noise proper.

In Attali's *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* noise is posited as transgressive, inasmuch that it exists as a violent freedom that is external to but nevertheless threatens the repressive violence of society. Music, by contrast, stands as a prophetic reflection of social orders: shifts in musical production and form preempt changes in social organisation. Noise, understood as uncoded disorder, threatens and disrupts established musical orders. However, noise's violent destruction of the old also heralds the constitution of the new; a new musical order emerges from the disruption of established codes. Thus 'despite the death it contains, noise carries order within itself; it carries new information'.³⁹ Noise mutates the structures it disrupts, transforming the relationship between music and noise in the process. While noise remains bound to a dualism that separates the inside and outside of an established structure—noise is uncoded sound that lies outside the sphere of coded sound, noise is chaos to music's order—the relationship between noise and music remains a dynamic process; a cycle of absorption, of noise into music. Music exists as noise codified and organised, disarmed of its violent, disruptive potential: 'noise is a weapon and music, primordially, is the formation, domestication, and ritualisation of that weapon as a simulacrum of ritual murder'.⁴⁰ Thus noise necessarily loses its noisiness as it is channelled into music over time. The future musical orders that noise contains are only brought into actuality as it is absorbed by music. Noise, if it is to exist in, or rather, *as* music, has to be sacrificed. Noise, as it is brought inside from the outside, becomes a shadow of itself. The new music is the once-was-noise, stripped of its primary, transgressive power.

If we define noise according to such dualisms—uncoded to coded, unwanted to wanted, chaos to order—then noise, when it becomes art, or music, is always destined to fail. Paul Hegarty, echoing Attali, notes:

‘failure’ is what defines noise in its encounter with music, for noise must fail to be noise if it is accepted, and of course it fails if not heard as well. This failure is where noise resides, the fate it selects for itself, or has selected for it. Noise must be only as if it were music, not as a new musicality.⁴¹

In other words, if noise music ‘succeeds’ as noise, then it fails as music but, likewise, if it ‘succeeds’ as music then it must, in part, fail as noise. But the affective definition of noise interrupts this logic. If we understand noise as an affect with effects, then the noise of noise music is no longer restricted to a simulation of noise ‘proper’. Rather, noise music’s noises, as interruptive forces that induce change, can be thought of, on one level, as genuine noises. The noise of noise music may be intended, it may be desired and it may be staged but, given that noise thought of in terms of as affect is no longer primarily distinguished in relation to its unwantedness, undesirability, non-meaning, disorder and so on, then the ‘constructedness’ of artistic noise is contingent upon its affectivity. We should also remind ourselves that, according to the definition outlined, noise is no longer primarily defined by the listener. As such we do not have to hear something *as* noise, for noise to be present.

In ‘the Joys of Noise’, Henry Cowell notes ‘the ‘disease’ of noise permeates all music ... although existing in all music, the noise-element has been to music as sex is to humanity, essential to its existence, but impolite to mention, something to be cloaked by ignorance and silence’.⁴² Unlike Attali’s sacrificed once-was-noise, Cowell’s noise lives: it flows throughout sounds and structures of music, modulating and distorting sonorities. For Cowell, noise forms an essential underpinning for climactic musical moments: ‘if it were not for the punctuation of the cymbal and the bass drum the climaxes in our operas would be like jelly-fish’.⁴³ But, as Cowell notes, perhaps what is most surprising is the contamination of sounds that we think of as musical. To be sure ‘a truly pure tone can be made only in an acoustical laboratory, and even there it is doubtful whether, by the time the tone has reached our ear, it has not been corrupted by resonances picked up on the way’.⁴⁴ Infection is

inevitable, yet the micro-noises that intervene with the transmission of the 'pure' acoustic tone are responsible for its timbral qualities; one need only think of the common assertion of the 'superiority' of (noise-infested) analogue's 'warmth' and 'fuzziness', over the cold, clean 'perfection' of the digital. As such, 'the only hopeful course is to consider that the noise-germ, like the bacteria of cheese, is a good microbe, which may provide previously hidden delights to the listener, instead of producing musical oblivion'.⁴⁵

We can infer from Cowell's proposition that noise music does not pertain to a making good of noise's bad through the medium of music: noise music does not just use the negative, positively. Rather, noise music can be thought of as foregrounding and extending the inevitable presence of noise in music. However, at this point, there would seem to be a need to differentiate between noise as it refers to sounds that are 'noisy', and noise as an active and productive process. We can think of the former as a timbral descriptor, for sounds that we hear as abrasive, messy or distorted. 'Noisy' sounds can be thought of as the audible outcome of certain noise processes that shape the sound in a particular way. Thus when a sound is described as 'noisy', this is not to say it necessarily functions, or is experienced as noise. Circuit bending, for example, is a process that works to 'noisify' circuits through power fluctuations, crossed wires and the modification of components, to generate new potentials of sounds. Subsequently, the primary 'noise' of a circuit bent toy is not directly heard; rather, it is only rendered perceptible through its sonic effects, the way in which the interruptions within the circuit modify the sonic output. Noise, as affective process, thus remains distinct from 'noisy' sounds that can be thought of as the audible outcome of such processes. More broadly, this distinction allows us to recognise noises that function on numerous artistic registers. It allows space for the noises that effect the generation or modification of materials that may be only audibly perceived through their effects, or may not be perceivable at all.

—CONCLUSION: THE NOISE NETWORK

The 'goodness' or 'badness' of noise, its wantedness or unwantedness, its intentionality or unintentionality, can be thought of as secondary, or contingent, to a (dis)continuous complex that connects noise's affective impact on the aesthetic to its affective impact on the flows of social networks, its affective impact on

communicative and informational channels, and its artistic manifestations. This is not to suggest that all noise events are the same; its actualisations within the empirical vary in intensity, context and materiality. But, arguably, there is something that can be called noise that remains autonomous from these particular actualisations, which flows between the various, interwoven planes of the sonic, social, technological, and political landscape. In turn, noise is not limited to the human, or those sounds that we typically think of as 'noisy'. It has an existence independent from particular subjects, objects and bodies and their correlative 'goodness' and 'badness'.

If the definition of noise provided in this article seems broad and vague then perhaps this tells something of the ubiquity and inevitability of noise. By suggesting that noise is ubiquitous, I mean to imply something different to the aesthetic moralist arguments of acoustic ecology, in which ubiquitous noise has led to the death of silence. While there have been plenty of recent conceptualisations of noise working to assert the sublime grandeur of noise, these accounts tend to miss the smaller, banal noises that shape our day-to-day encounters.⁴⁶ Thinking of noise as affect can, hopefully, allow for the dramatic experiences of noise (as, for example, the erasure of self, the interruption of the symbolic, the moment of the sublime) as well as the everyday experiences of noise (the barely noticeable interruptions, the noises we are accustomed to). Furthermore, the openness of noise as affect, its lack of specificity regarding sources, origins and objects, and its lack of commitment in saying what noise is or is not, is to some degree in keeping with the Spinozan spirit: how can we say what noise is when *we know not yet what noise can do*?

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—NOTES

- ¹ Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary*, Dover Publications, New York, 1993, p. 85.
- ² Karin Bijsterveld, *Mechanical Sound: Technology, Culture and Public Problems of Noise in the Twentieth Century*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2008 p. 240.
- ³ Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1985, p. 27.
- ⁴ For a more detailed historical examination of noise abatement legislation that exists around the world see R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*, Destiny Books, Vermont, 1994, p. 191–3.
- ⁵ J.R. Pierce, *An Introduction to Information Theory: Symbols, Signals and Noise*, 2nd edn, Dover, New York, 1980 p. 145–6.
- ⁶ Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence R. Schehr, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2007, p. 3.
- ⁷ Serres, p. 230.
- ⁸ Steven Crocker, 'Noise and Exceptions: Pure Mediality in Serres and Agamben', *CTheory*, 2007, <<http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=574#bio>>.
- ⁹ Ibid., p. 79.
- ¹⁰ Steven Connor, 'Michel Serre's Milieux', 2002, <<http://www.stevenconnor.com/milieux/>>.
- ¹¹ Crocker.
- ¹² There have been a number of empirical studies from psychiatry and medicine that have suggested a link, to varying degrees, between noise exposure and adverse psychological and physiological effects. However, within these studies noise tends to be defined as synonymous with loud or damaging sound. Moreover, there is a difficulty in examining the impact of noise upon individuals when it may be inextricable from other environmental factors. Workers in industrial environments, for example, are exposed to other stressors such as physical danger and heavy work demands, as well as excessive noise levels. See Stephen A. Stansfeld and Mark P. Matheson, 'Noise Pollution: Non-auditory Effects on Health', *British Medical Bulletin*, vol. 68, 2003, pp. 243–57.
- ¹³ Affect is a recurring theme in the work of Deleuze and Guattari, having a central role in their 'ontology of forces'. For example, see Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Graham Burchell and Hugh Tomlinson, Verso, London (in particular pp. 163–200). For Massumi's use of affect see Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2002.
- ¹⁴ Melissa J. Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, *The Affect Theory Reader*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2010, p. 2.
- ¹⁵ While affect can be thought of as distinct from emotions there are also theorisations of affect, in which affect and emotions, as well as moods and feelings, are used as interchangeable terms. It is worth emphasising here that there is no one, unified, theory of affect; rather, there exists numerous disciplinary and inter-disciplinary conceptualisations of it. For a summary of some of the different

prominent theories of affect, see the introduction to Gregg and Seigworth (eds), *The Affect Theory Reader*, pp. 6–12.

¹⁶ Jonathan Flatley, *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2008, p. 12.

¹⁷ Félix Guattari, 'Ritornellos and Existential Affects' in *The Guattari Reader*, ed. Gary Genosko, Blackwell, Oxford, 1996, pp. 80, 158.

¹⁸ Gregory J. Seigworth, 'Fashioning a Stave, or Singing Life' in *Animations of Deleuze and Guattari*, ed. Jennifer Daryl Slack, Peter Lang, New York, 2003, pp. 75–105, p. 80, my emphasis.

¹⁹ It should be noted that what follows corresponds to the Deleuzian reading of Spinoza. See Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, trans. Martin Joughin, Zone Books, New York, 1992 and Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, trans. Robert Hurley, City Light Books, San Francisco, 1988.

²⁰ Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. Edwin Curley, Penguin Books, London, 1996, p. 41.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

²² Chris McGreal, 'Palestinians Hit by Sonic Boom Air Raids', *Guardian*, 3 November 2005, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2005/nov/03/israel>>. Susanne Cusick has also written extensively about the use of sound, in particular music, as a weapon and means of torture. Cusick's work is of interest within this context, since it explicitly details the ability of music to function as noise. See Susanne G. Cusick, 'Music as Weapon/Music as Torture', *Transcultural Music Review*, vol. 10, 2006, <<http://www.sibetrans.com/trans/a152/music-as-torture-music-as-weapon>>. See also Susanne G. Cusick, 'Musicology, Torture, Repair', *Radical Musicology*, vol. 3, 2008, <<http://www.radical-musicology.org.uk/2008.htm>>.

²³ Steve Goodman, *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect and the Ecology of Fear*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2009 p. xiv.

²⁴ In the biblical tale from the Book of Joshua, the Israelites march round the walls of Jericho for seven days. On the seventh day, they shouted and blew trumpets. It is told that this sonic force caused the walls of Jericho to fall, killing its populous.

²⁵ Paul Hegarty, *Noise/Music A History*, Continuum, London, 2008, p. 197.

²⁶ Garret Keizer, *The Unwanted Sound of Everything We Want: A Book About Noise*, New York, Public Affairs, 2010, p. 44.

²⁷ Paul Hegarty, 'Just What is it that Makes Today's Noise Music So Different, So Appealing', *Organised Sound*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2008, pp. 13–20, p. 13.

²⁸ Schafer, p. 254.

²⁹ Stuart Sim, *Manifesto For Silence: Confronting the Politics and Culture of Noise*, University of Edinburgh Press, Edinburgh, 2007, p. 39.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

- ³¹ Anahid Kassabian, 'Ubiquitous Listening and Networked Subjectivity', *ECHO*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2001, <<http://www.echo.ucla.edu/Volume3-issue2/kassabian/index.html>>.
- ³² For more on this, see Anahid Kassabian, 'Music for Sleeping' in *Sound, Music, Affect: Theorising Sonic Experience*, ed. Marie Thompson and Ian Biddle, Continuum, London, forthcoming, 2013.
- ³³ For an explanation of how each of these social groups are more likely to be exposed to noise see Keizer, p. 11.
- ³⁴ Keizer, p. 101.
- ³⁵ Jacqueline Waldock, 'Soundmapping: Critiques and Reflections on this New Publicly Engaging Medium', *Journal of Sonic Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2011, <<http://journal.sonicstudies.org/vol01/nr01/a08>>.
- ³⁶ Ibid.
- ³⁷ In 'Plato's Pharmacy', Derrida traces the connections and legacies of the term 'Pharmakon'. The pharmakon is based on a seeming contradiction. It refers to, among other things, both poison and its cure: the pharmakon can poison but it can also cure. See Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson, Continuum, London, New York, 2004.
- ³⁸ Attali, p. 27.
- ³⁹ Ibid., p. 33.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 24.
- ⁴¹ Hegarty, p. 15.
- ⁴² Henry Cowell, 'The Joys of Noise' in *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, ed. Christopher Cox and Daniel Warner, Continuum, London, 2006, pp 22–4.
- ⁴³ Ibid., p. 23.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid.